

# Rules of the Game

## Two-Handed Fighting (Part Two)

By Skip Williams



Last week, we reviewed the basics of two-handed fighting. This week, we'll consider the ins and outs of fighting with a weapon in each hand.



### Melee Fighting with Two Weapons

As noted in Part One, you must use the full attack action to attack with two weapons at once; if you use the **attack** action, you can attack only once despite the number of weapons you wield. You also need a weapon or two, though you can use **unarmed** strikes as your "weapons" in a two-weapon attack (see page 160 in the *Player's Handbook*).

Also as noted Part One, attacking with two weapons also imposes a **penalty** on your **attack rolls**. Fighting this way is quite difficult, and without special training, you don't have much chance for success. The Two-Weapon Fighting feat eases the penalties quite a bit, and using a **light weapon** in your **off hand** helps, too. Table 8-10 in the *Player's Handbook* shows the attack penalties for various sorts of two-weapon attacks. The table is reproduced here, along with a few notes and comments.

Circumstances	Primary Hand	Off Hand
Normal penalties	-6	-10
Off-hand weapon is light	-4	-8
Two-Weapon Fighting feat	-4	-4
Off-hand weapon is light and Two-Weapon Fighting feat	-2	-2

**Attack Penalties:** When you use the full attack action to attack with two weapons, you can make your primary and off-hand attacks in any order -- though most people attack with the primary hand first.

You do not have to choose between the attack and full attack actions until after you have made your first attack on your turn (see page 143 in the *Player's Handbook*). However, if you intend to attack with two weapons during your action, you must take the correct penalty for each attack or give up your opportunity to use your second weapon (because the rules require you to take a penalty on attacks you make with both your primary and off hands). For example, suppose you hold a longsword in your primary hand and carry a lit torch in your off hand. It's reasonable to assume the torch is a light weapon, albeit an improvised weapon. You don't have the Two-Weapon Fighting feat, but being able to see in the torchlight is more important to you than a shield right now.

If something leaps out at you and you decide to hack at it with your sword, you could also try to whack it with your torch (perhaps the foe seems slightly flammable, or perhaps you suspect you're facing a regenerating monster). You can make your attack roll with your longsword and observe the result before deciding between an attack or a full attack, but you must take a -4 attack penalty on that primary hand attack to preserve your option to attack with the torch. In this situation it would be entirely reasonable for the DM to make you take the -4 attack penalty before you see your first attack's result (because it speeds play); however that's not strictly necessary. The DM might allow you to see the result before deciding to attack with the torch. If that is so and you decide to try an attack with the torch, your DM must recalculate the result of your sword attack, taking the primary weapon penalty into account. (I don't recommend this option, but it fits the letter of the rules.)

Even if you decide to take the penalty, you don't have to attack with the torch, or even use the full attack action. If you decide to attack with the torch, you make a single attack with the torch and you'll take a -8 penalty for the off-hand attack and an additional -4 penalty for the improvised weapon (see page 113 in the *Player's Handbook*), for a total penalty of -12.

Once you take a two-weapon fighting penalty, the penalty applies to all the attacks you make with that hand during your current **action**. It does not apply to attacks you make during some other character's turn. For example, say your torch-wielding swordfighter from the previous example has a base attack bonus of +10. With the full attack action, the character could make two attacks with the sword: one at +10 and the other at +5.

If you opt to throw in an off-hand attack with the torch, the -4 penalty for your primary hand applies to both attacks, dropping your attack bonus to +6 ( $10 - 4 = 6$ ) and +1 ( $5 - 4 = 1$ ). When you attack with the torch, you make only a single attack (because the two-weapon fighting option allows you only one extra attack) at -2 (you use your full attack bonus for the single attack, so that's  $10 - 8$  for an off-hand attack with a light weapon and an additional -4 for the improvised weapon).

**From page 143 of the *Player's Handbook*:**

### **Full Attack**

If you get more than one attack per round because your base attack bonus is high enough, because you fight with two weapons or a double weapon (see Two-Weapon Fighting under Special Attacks, page 160), or for some special reason (such as a feat or a magic item), you must use a full-round action to get your additional attacks. You do not need to specify the targets of your attacks ahead of time. You can see how the earlier attacks turn out before assigning the later ones.

The only movement you can take during a full attack is a 5-foot step. You may take the step before, after, or between your attacks.

If you get multiple attacks because your base attack bonus is high enough, you must make the attacks in order from highest bonus to lowest. If you are using two weapons, you can strike with either weapon first. If you are using a double weapon, you can strike with either part of the weapon first.

### **Deciding between an Attack or a Full**

**Attack:** After your first attack, you can decide to take a move action instead of making your remaining attacks, depending on how the first attack turns out. If you've already taken a 5-foot step, you can't use your move action to move any distance, but you could still use a different kind of move action.

Some attack penalties you voluntarily assume, such as the penalty for defensive fighting (see pages 140 and 143 in the *Player's Handbook*), apply until your next turn, but two weapon penalties are not one of them.

If, after you made two-weapon attacks with your sword and torch, a foe later provokes an attack of opportunity from you that same round, you can strike that foe with your longsword with no two-weapon penalty at all. (You also can use just the torch, also with no two-weapon penalty, though you still take the -4 penalty for an off-hand attack; you also still take the -4 penalty for an improvised weapon for a total penalty of -8.)

**Light Weapons:** Refer to Table 7-5 in the *Player's Handbook* to determine if a weapon is light. If you're using a weapon from a book other than the *Player's Handbook*, refer to the tables (or weapon description) provided in that book to determine if a weapon is light. Remember that an unarmed strike is considered a light weapon and that the off-hand end of a double weapon also is considered a light weapon.

### Ability Modifiers in Two-Weapon Melee Fighting

The text in the previous section ignores any **ability modifiers** that apply to your **melee attacks**. Your **Strength** modifier applies to any **melee attack roll** you make, even to attacks with an off-hand weapon. Your damage bonus (if any) from Strength is always halved for your off hand whether your off-hand weapon is light or **one-handed** (see page 113 in the *Player's Handbook*).

If you use the Weapon Finesse feat when attacking with two weapons in melee, your **Dexterity** modifier applies to attacks you make with any weapon that can receive it (a light weapon, or a rapier, whip, or spiked chain; see the feat description). If you're using one weapon that can receive the Dexterity modifier and one that cannot, use your Strength modifier to resolve your attack (or attacks) with the latter weapon.

When using the Weapon Finesse feat (see page 102 in the *Player's Handbook*), the armor check penalty from any shield you carry applies to your attack rolls. This doesn't present a problem when you're fighting with two weapons unless you happen to be using a weapon that also has an armor check penalty, such as a spiked shield. If so, the armor check penalty applies to any attack you make with the Weapon Finesse feat.

For example, if you carry a rapier and a spiked masterwork heavy steel shield, you would use your Dexterity modifier for attacks with the rapier and you'd take a -1 penalty for the shield's armor check penalty (-2 reduced to -1 because it's masterwork). If you attack with both the rapier and the spiked heavy steel shield, you'd use your Strength modifier to resolve the shield attack (because the shield is a one-handed weapon and cannot receive your Dexterity modifier) and its armor check penalty would not apply because you aren't using it with Weapon Finesse. Your rapier attack would be resolved as noted previously and both weapons would receive additional attack penalties for being your primary or off-hand weapon in a two-weapon attack.

### Ranged Fighting with Two Weapons

Attacks with two **thrown weapons** work just as noted for melee weapons, except that you use your Dexterity modifier to resolve **ranged attacks**. You still use your Strength modifier for damage rolls (but only half your Strength bonus for damage rolls with your off-hand weapon).

Ranged weapons you don't throw use most of the rules for two-weapon fighting; however, the Two-Weapon Fighting feat and related feats don't apply to ranged weapons that aren't thrown. Because most ranged weapons that aren't thrown are two-handed weapons, this isn't a big deal. Crossbows, however, can be fired (but not reloaded) with one hand. The crossbow weapon descriptions in Chapter 7 of the *Player's Handbook* cover shooting the two crossbows. Here's a summary:

**Hand Crossbow:** Treat a hand crossbow as a light weapon in a two-weapon attack.

**Light Crossbow:** Treat a light crossbow as a light weapon in a two-weapon attack; you also take a -2 attack penalty when firing a light crossbow one-handed. If you were shooting a light crossbow with each hand you'd have a -6 penalty with your primary hand and a -10 penalty with your off hand. A light crossbow is a light weapon, so the basic penalty is -4 for your primary hand and -8 for your off hand, and you must add the -2 penalty for one-handed shooting on top of that.

**Heavy Crossbow:** Treat a heavy crossbow as a one-handed weapon in a two-weapon attack; you also take a -4 attack penalty when firing a heavy crossbow one-handed. If you were shooting a heavy crossbow with each hand, you'd have a -10 penalty with your primary hand and a -14 penalty with your off hand. A heavy crossbow is a one-handed weapon, so the basic penalty is -6 for your primary hand and -10 for your off hand, and you must add the -4 penalty for one-handed shooting on top of that.

**Repeating Crossbow:** Use the rules for the crossbow's size. Even when the repeating crossbow's magazine holds bolts, you must use two hands to reload it.

## Slings

You can fire, but not reload, a sling with one hand. You can't use a sling as part of a two-weapon attack.

## What's Next?

That's all the time we have for this week. Next week, we'll conclude our look at two-weapon fighting with a few examples of two-weapon fighting and we'll consider a few related topics.

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## About the Author

**Skip Williams** keeps busy with freelance projects for several different game companies and was the Sage of *Dragon Magazine* for many years. Skip is a co-designer of the **D&D** 3rd Edition game and the chief architect of the *Monster Manual*. When not devising swift and cruel deaths for player characters, Skip putters in his kitchen or garden (rabbits and deer are not Skip's friends) or works on repairing and improving the century-old farmhouse that he shares with his wife, Penny, and a growing menagerie of pets.

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